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Group: 2 (Forms 3-5)
Topic: Dear America

Dear America,

Who would not know about this great nation? Its name is synonymous with modernisation and great power. Take for example, the world's busiest pedestrian intersection, brightly adorned with colourful, enormous billboards and advertisements of Coca Cola or the latest Chanel collections. There are people dressed in the latest fashions rushing to meetings or auditions that may cost millions of US dollars. That is the Centre of the Universe, the Times Square in the global power city, New York. I have seen this remarkable scene in the Spiderman 2002 film and viewed it on The Amazing Race. I was mesmerised by the gorgeous city that is known as the Heart of the World. The bird's-eye view from the windows of any skyscraper reveals a picture full of shining colourful lights like blinking stars, like the American dreams of every youngster. I furthered my understanding of America's social culture through America's Got Talent and America's Top Model, and I was deeply impressed by Americans' open-minded thoughts and freedom in speech, as well as actions.

Thanks for giving me, this little frog in a pitch dark well, a vivid image of the outside world, a brand new world to be explored. To express my gratitude, dear Americans, I am honoured to show you some amazing facts about Malaysia, a tiny multiracial country in South-East Asia.

Let's start with this third largest island in the world, right after Greenland and New Guinea. This particular Borneo island is divided into three parts and is shared by three distinct countries in Asia. They are the Independent Sultanate of Brunei, Indonesia, and our own Malaysia. Have you ever heard of Rafflesia, the LARGEST flower in the world? Those gigantic ladies are hiding inside the woods of Sabah, giving out the most unique odour to attract their favourite desserts. Their parasitic relatives, *Rafflesia arnoldii*, or the "CORPSE FLOWER," is known for its unbearable odour to humans but deadly temptations to those doltish insects. Rafflesias set their invisible foot on Malaysia's Kinabalu National Park. The ladies are too shy. and thus embed themselves into the pitiful host plant. The only visible part is the large, bloody-red flower. Can you believe that its bloom can be up to 1 metre wide and weigh 6.8 kilogram?

How about the LARGEST undivided leaf in the world, *Alocasia macrorrhiza*? Amazingly, this fantastic masterpiece also comes from Sabah, the Land Below the Wind. In 1966, a specimen found was exceeding 3.02 metres long and 1.92 metres

wide. Have you ever viewed wild orang utans up close? You would instantly fall in love with these adorable and smart creatures, known as “men of the forest”, that can only be found in the wilderness of Borneo and Sumatra. Orang utan is certified as humans’ closest relative and Asia’s only great ape. They act exactly like humans with fluffy fur, practically peeling the skin of bananas before savouring the scrumptious meals and even smiling merrily at the camera focusing on them!

Putting aside the wide diversity of wildlife, have you ever heard about the rumours of HEADHUNTING culture in Borneo? There are still a few unusual reported cases once every few years, though headhunting has been stamped out in Borneo. Up until the 20th century, headhunting was a common and even fashionable trend among the many Dayak tribes in Malaysia. Among them, the Iban tribes were the most fearsome. They took the skulls of their victims as trophies of manhood after slaughtering those who were considered intruders in their territories. Some freshly chopped heads were used for religious ceremonies to venerate the spirits. The dried skulls were cleaned up and then hung on the walls of their living rooms as decorations. Those skulls were the pride and honour of an alpha male, and the number of skulls represented a male’s strength. Women would be madly in love and worship their “heroes.” Nowadays, it is believed that many Dayak tribes still continue to celebrate their headhunting ceremonially as the continuation of tradition and culture. For instance, the Adat Ngayau ceremony uses coconut shells wrapped in leaves as a substitute for freshly cut heads. I would advise you to think twice if you are looking forward to exploring the wilderness. A local guide might be a better choice to stay away from direct danger.

Now, let us turn our focus to Sarawak, Sabah’s neighbour and the hornbill’s home! The LARGEST cave chamber in the world is the Sarawak Chamber in Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak, which can even easily accommodate up to 40 Boeing 747-200 planes. Can you believe that? Just come and search for the truth yourself! As a pure Sarawakian, I myself find some of the Ibans’ traditions quite mind-blowing. For your information, among the Iban community in Malaysia’s Sarawak province, before a newly born baby is named, they are generally called *ulat*, which means worms, regardless of their gender. When the baby is named, according to tradition, he or she must be named after a deceased family member, for fear that using a living relative’s name might shorten the baby’s lifespan. Once the parents of the baby have chosen a number of names, the same number of rice balls are made, each representing a name. They are then brought to a *manok tawai* (fighting cock) in the village. The first rice ball pecked at by *manok tawai* determines the child’s name without a doubt.

Dear Americans, I have read all kinds of stories about witches, like Hansel and Gretel and Snow White. Now, let me introduce the witches from Malaysia, BOMOH. Bomoh is a shaman, like a witch of Malaysia, particularly known for his fascinating

healing powers, protective magic, and knowledge of medicinal herbs. Even till now, the villagers in the outskirts of Malaysia still have a strong belief in the bomoh's magical power. Therefore, many '*kampung*' sports teams pay through their noses to employ magic to help them win a single match or to win a bet with their friends. According to rumours, a bomoh will blow colourful holy smoke over the team's soccer boots or even equip them with specific amulets. If he is able to get to the field before the match, he may also plant a little charm near the goalposts, but he will never let the cat out of the bag to tell if it is true.

Next, we will travel over the South China Sea to West Malaysia. Unlike how East Malaysia is embraced by Mother Nature's blessing, West Malaysia is full of bustling cities with modern technology. These are the basic necessities of man's daily routine, and are the most common sight. However, before such abundant civilisation, in the 19th century, the sultans of the Malay Peninsula would order executions to be carried out using the '*keris*', a ceremonial dagger made by local Malays. The executioner would stand with a long '*keris*' behind the condemned man. A small piece of cotton was placed on the shoulder of the condemned man to stop the bleeding to minimise the risk of trauma among the crowd. The executioner would hold the blade of the '*keris*' perpendicularly and then harshly drive it down through the collarbone into the condemned man's heart. Death was absolute and instantaneous. The cotton wool was then held in place as the blade was withdrawn. Sultans were once glorified as representatives of God on Earth, and treason to Sultans was calamitous to humanity.

Last but not least, my dear Americans, would you like to have a taste of our King of Fruit, durians? Our Cat Mountain King durians are described as a heavenly feast by our own Malaysians. Its thick, golden yellow flesh has an extraordinarily smooth texture with little or no fibres. For the first bite, you can feel the sticky and creamy flesh melting gradually inside your mouth, bursting with unforgettable sweetness mingled with a little bitterness. Just with one bite, you will get addicted to the magnificent taste that will melt your heart together with the flesh. Some foreigners seem put off by the odour of durians, but please just give it a try with no regrets! The odour has always been the rival of dieting ladies.

Dear Americans, I have poured my whole heart into this invitation for you all. Please put aside any unrelated personal matters and take a break from your hectic schedule in the hustle and bustle of America to explore the beauty of Malaysia. The gateway to the uniqueness of Malaysia is always open for you!

(1480 words)